



Evening River

This is another story from the 'Summer Suite' - a collection of stories written during the summer of 1994, when our family spent a month staying at the home of my late father-in-law, in a small village in Mie Prefecture.

The long hot noisy summer day is almost over. My kids have finally tired of swimming, splashing and screaming, and have headed back to the house. The visitors from the city have loaded their rubber rings, face masks, and flippers back into their cars, and driven off. I am left alone on the river bank as the sun dips closer to the mountains. A wonderful peace and calm falls over the scene.

From where I sit, the setting sun is directly over the river, off to my right, and the surface of the water has taken the colour and texture of the evening sky. The glassy sheet is covered with streams of pollen dust, over which dragonflies skim back and forth, occasionally dipping down to touch the surface and toss a tiny burst of diamonds into the air. The water is disturbed from below as well, as the tiny fingerlings swimming there rise up to nibble at the invisible gnats fluttering over the water.

How I now regret my 'modern' education! This scene is made for poets, but I have no poetry in me. Men of just a couple of generations ago, who read their Keats and Wordsworth from an early age ... perhaps those men could describe what I see this evening. They could find the phrases to describe those shadows that pass by under the river surface over against the far bank, the deep deep place made even darker by the thick grove of trees that leans over the water there.

But even as I watch, one of the shadows rises nearer the surface, and colours become apparent. It is a *koi*, orange and white, followed by another, and then two more, one white, one grey. They don't come all the way up to the surface, but hover about a foot below, swimming slowly this way and that, then coming to the shallows near where I sit. I see that they are followed by a mass of tiny fishes, presumably finding food in the mud stirred up by the bigger *koi*.

As the sun dips even further, I hear a faint buzz behind me, and when I look over my shoulder, find that the field there has also transformed. Floating in uncountable millions over the golden rice are midges, cloud after boiling cloud of them. And darting through the clouds are hundreds more dragonflies, enjoying an evening feast.

Everywhere I look now, the scene is full of life - the fields, the river, the forest opposite. All these creatures, who had been quietly hiding or sleeping while we humans took our turn during the day, now come out to do their own business as we leave for our own sleep.

Perhaps it will continue all night, but I will not be here to see it, because with the sun now gone below the mountain ridge, the chill rising tells me that it is time for me too, to leave. So I gather my things, and regretfully start for home.

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But just along the bank ... a young couple more thoughtful than I, who have prepared themselves with warm clothes, are settling in for an evening picnic. I leave the river to them. And that's just how it should be. These lovers will pick up where I leave off. They will find no poetic frustration in this scene, for they will need to use no words ...

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